
Kenneth D. Rose. *Unspeakable Awfulness: America Through the Eyes of European Travelers, 1865-1900.*

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REFERENCES

New York and London: Routledge, 2014. Pp. xii + 288. ISBN 978-0-415-81765-3.

- 1 I would insist that most of us Europeans who have traveled a lot in the United States can identify with some of the stories Kenneth D. Rose raises in this volume. If travelers today are awestruck by the mightiness of the Grand Canyon or the Yellowstone, gulp at the pulse, wealth, and poverty in urban metropolises like Chicago or New York, or have difficulties understanding the seemingly work-obsessed lifestyles of most Americans, many of the same issues were raised by Europeans touring Gilded Age America. Whether or not it is (or was in the 1800s) possible to speak of something like an European perspective of America, in the minds of many travelers the United States stood (and still stands) for something deeply fascinating and potentially liberating but also shallow and somewhat disturbing. America is awesome, mighty, and big, and it is rich, energetic, and welcoming to visitors, but it also seems haunted by racial discrimination, somewhat self-centered, and at times even jingoist.
- 2 Penetrating beyond the surface, looking at the mentalities and motivations shaping the discourses of European travelers holds much promise for a thoughtful scholarly investigation. And the European travel experience in America begs for a sophisticated historical overview. This study, unfortunately, is really neither of those things. The author, who teaches history at California State University, Chico, shuns theory and opts for description in place of analysis. He tries to write to broad audiences and the non-specialist. However, as captivating narrative histories go Rose's study fails to fulfill all its potential, although it does at times offer a breathtaking ride. The reader is represented

with a broad array of travelers' descriptions while taken on a broad tour of American society and life. We get to read on urban and rural landscapes, the American West, and post-Civil War South, as well as on dress, drinking, education, gender roles, politics, patriotism, and many others aspects the travelers thought worth noticing.

- 3 Some of the problems of this study come obvious early on. Like so many of today's travel series on television, the author for some reason wants to prove that there exists something called "American character" because many of the European travelers apparently endorsed such an idea. Regardless of whether they actually did or not, pinpointing "American character" usually proves more difficult and elusive than claiming such a thing exists. So it is with this study. The reader is left with some broad generalizations (that at most prove partial fits) such as "energy," "egalitarianism," and "utilitarianism." When endorsing "American character," Rose is not merely writing against the grain of much recent historiography, but essentially advocates American exceptionalism. He points out, for instance, how "life in America was conducted on a radically different premise than it was in Europe" (p. 19) and that "the United States in this period was arguably the most dynamic nation on the planet" (p. 24).
- 4 Offering a wide-ranging tour to the writings and experiences of European travelers many of the eight thematically organized chapters come out fragmented, covering a disjointed selection of subject matters. Discussing not just character and class, but also adding dress, money and advertising to the mix, the first chapter gives an example of the frustrating aspects of this book. While we are represented with a wide array of travelers' thoughts, the chapter always feels somewhat hurried as if the author feels compelled to rush forward to cover all his themes. Also, the chapter not only makes it seem as if Europeans described an America free of class divisions, labor problems, and working class servility, but that this actually was the reality. Certainly the Irish, Italian, Polish, Hispanic, Chinese, or African-American factory worker, railroad builder, domestic, or common laborer would have disagreed. The built environment, not just cities but also transportation, forms the subject of chapter two. Picking up speed the next two chapters are probably the most problematic in the whole book. Chapter 3, in sixteen pages of text, sums "Culture: Aesthetics, Music, Language, Humor, and Copyright and Journalism." For its part Chapter 4 gives us "Personal Habits: Dining, Drinking, Tobacco Chewing, and Gun Use" in thirteen pages (plus the notes). One could ask, for instance, how is gun use really a personal habit. Even if it is, is it comparable to dining and drinking? Also, do we need separate sections on tobacco chewing (1 page) or copyright?
- 5 Rather than dwell on textual analysis, deliberate on travelers intentions, or discuss the societies that shaped those journeying to America, the author says his focus is on what the travelers actually said and who they were (p. 19). Still, while we do learn that most travelers were at least relatively wealthy or wrote for a living, we get practically nothing on the backgrounds and motives of individual travelers. Why most came to America at the time they did also remains pretty much a mystery. Focusing on the "what" instead of the "why" or "what it meant" Rose lets the travelers speak. While direct quotations enliven the text nicely, overt prioritizing of quotes from primary sources at the expense of analysis or historical context does at times make for a rather hollow, fragmentary, reading experience. Now and again the text bears a resemblance to an endless avalanche of quotations. One can find ten or more quotes on a single page. With each source pretty much having its own note, for example the sixteen pages of text in Chapter 3 and the thirteen pages of Chapter 4 contain no less than 184 and 146 endnotes, respectively.

- 6 Arguably those chapters that are less crammed work much better. First, in Chapter 6 the author provides intimate insights into southern mentalities as witnessed by travelers. Post-emancipation South appears as a scarred and troubled society engaged in the process of reinvention at the dawn of Jim Crow. We also get to read some interesting views as European travelers assess the experience and transformation European immigrants were undergoing in their new chosen homes. The last chapter also offers a pleasant tour of travelers and the American West, discussing travel writings pertaining to vast lands (although the Southwest is curiously absent), Indians, Wild West shows, and tourists, among other things.
- 7 While Rose's study appears problematic and oftentimes frustrating in the eyes of an academic reviewer, it still has its merits. Travel writing and its history represent not merely a genre that refuses to die, but can offer especially intriguing vistas for scholars working on transnational, colonial, or borderlands histories, especially for those interested in the processes of cross-cultural relations, othering, and identity-building. What this book represents is a spectrum of the possibilities. It might entertain the casual reader, but it can also offer the specialist avenues of investigation through its bewildering selection of themes and by introducing a wide selection of primary sources.
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